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ABSTRACT

A study examined the practitioner's perspective of literature and how literature is being used in the classroom. Teachers, librarians, and administrators at a suburban school serving over 700 children from kindergarten through fifth grade were interviewed, and professional journals directed toward practitioners, published curriculum guides, and books about children's literature written for teachers were examined. Findings indicated that the observed classroom and curricular uses of literature focused on helping students develop a love of reading and developing reading proficiency by reading, but that these activities emphasized developmental curriculum the least. The lower grades, using a whole language approach, showed more evidence of a developmental curricular focus. Findings indicated that the commonly occurring literature curriculum objectives of exposure to different literary genres and the recognition of the use of literary forms and devices were not evident in the classroom and that professional materials had limited influence on the practitioner. (RS)

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# THE USE OF LITERATURE IN A SCHOOL:

# AN INQUIRY

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# The Use of Literature in a School: An Inquiry

## Introduction

Literature is one of those terms we assume everyone understands until we stop to specifically examine it. A discussion of literature among educators quickly establishes that not only do we lack a common and specific definition for literature, but we also hold a variety of expectations for how literature should be used and what its uses can accomplish in the classroom. This variety seems to bear out in practice. The amount, diversity and purposes of literature use vary across teachers, and similar differences are found in the educational literature and curriculum guides on the subject. In this inquiry, I have attempted to explore the uses of literature in an elementary school and in the professional literature. This paper summarizes my inquiry into the practitioner's perspective of literature and how is it being used in elementary classrooms today.

## Description of Activities

The school involved in this inquiry was a large suburban school serving over 700 children from kindergarten through grade five. Racially and socioeconomically the school reflected the district in which it is located; the great majority of the students were white and middle class. Teachers at all grade levels as well as the librarian and

administrators were interviewed as part of the inquiry. There were also brief notations of classroom activities in several cases. Open ended questions were used in the interviews to elicit responses related to working definitions of literature, its uses in the school's classrooms, and the influences which impacted teachers' practices.

My discussions with the teachers led to further explorations in professional literature which focus on the practitioner. These were primarily books about children's literature written for teachers, professional journals directed toward practitioners, and published curriculum guides of instructional expectations related to literature.

Three books about children's literature were reviewed in detail. These were Arbuthnot's Children And Books (a text frequently used in college courses on children's literature during the past two decades), Cullinan's Children's Literature in the Reading Program (a recently published text advocating use of literature in the elementary school program), and Trelease's The Read-Aloud Handbook (a text specifically mentioned by two teachers interviewed in this inquiry).

Two professional periodicals directed toward the elementary classroom practitioner were reviewed. These were

the International Reading Association's Reading Teacher and the National Council of Teachers of English's Language Arts. Monthly editions for the past decade (1979-1988) were examined for patterns across articles featuring the use of literature in the classroom. Over 170 articles (excluding monthly columns and articles limited to recommendations of children's books) were located and categorized according to emergent themes.

Additionally, state language arts and/or reading curriculum guides published within the past six years were checked for statements relevant to the use of literature in the curriculum. Eight such guides were located, representing a fifteen percent sample of the country.

Two major assumptions were involved in this inquiry. The first presumed that the uses of literature in the school served instructional purposes which were related to curriculum goals. For the purposes of this inquiry, curriculum was defined as a course of instruction or study toward a particular purpose or goal. In a specific sense, formal curriculum would be developmental in nature building from simple toward more complex levels of understanding. A second assumption was that there are limitations on the connections which can be made between what the teachers reported in this small sample and the statements extracted

from the professional literature reviewed. These are the personal inferences of this writer; generalizable conclusions can not validly or reliably be assumed without more extensive study.

## Findings and Implications

### What is Literature?

The interviewed teachers' definitions of literature ranged from very broad to quite specific. For example, one teacher described literature as "anything we read or write" while one of her colleagues defined it as "classical and modern works which teach moral values and emphasize human relationships." How a teacher viewed literature seemed directly related to the activities that teacher then discussed for his/her classroom.

The teachers frequently referred to "good literature". Although this was not specifically defined, it was variously described as "popular or well-known books", "books by good authors", "(books) with characterization development and plot resolution," and books which have "moral building quality." The term good literature was commonly used in the professional literature as if it had an understood and accepted definition. Approximately one-third of the state curriculum guides made reference to good literature as did a number of articles in the periodicals reviewed.

The texts on children's literature defined good literature in different ways. Arbuthnot stated that "a book is a good book for children only when they enjoy it" (p.2). Cullinan provided a more technical definition: "good literature contains well crafted elements which create a coherent picture and support logical inferences....Students remember and are quick to recall good literature" (p. 3). Trelease discussed good literature as providing meaning in our lives, quoting Bruno Bettelheim that the "finding of this meaning is the greatest need and most difficult achievement for any human being of any age. Who am I? Why am I here? What can I be?" (p. 9).

**How is Literature Used in the Classroom?**

The teachers interviewed reported a wide variety of literature activities in their classrooms. These most commonly involved getting children in contact with trade books or related printed material. Silent reading in the classroom was popular, including silent sustained reading in grades 3 and 5, Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) in grade 2, and a kindergarten read-along listening center. Weekly book reports were required for students in grades 2, 3 and 5.

Reading outside the classroom was also widely promoted. Third graders were assigned reading as homework

at least once each week; kindergartners, first, fourth and fifth graders tracked the amount of outside reading they did. Reading incentive programs sponsored by the school's P.T.A., the "Read the Zoo" program, and the Pizza Hut "Book It" program also encouraged reading outside of school. All teachers mentioned using children's book clubs, such as Arrow, Troll, Lucky and Scholastic, although the frequent and consistent use of such clubs seemed to vary.

The teacher reading aloud to the class was the single literature activty mentioned most often. All teachers interviewed talked about reading aloud to students in one way or another. The kindergarten and first grade teachers read at least one book a day aloud with their students. The librarian had developed "read aloud" lists of books she shared with various grade levels. The fifth grade teacher and his students shared the role of reading aloud to the class. The third grade teacher read aloud from good literature for at least 30 minutes daily after lunch.

Collaborative uses of literature were easily found. All of the school's classes participated in a "Book Buddies" program where a primary grade classroom was paired with an upper grade classroom. Students within the two classes were then paired for book sharing activities; for example, the older student would select a book to read to the younger

student and then the two would draw a picture to illustrate the story. Literature study groups were mentioned with some frequency at the third, fourth and fifth grades. Typically in this activity ten or more students read and discussed the same book. Several teachers also set up reading activities for pairs of students. Sometimes this was a cross-ability pairing, while in other cases it was to work on book report projects.

The use of trade books in addition to or in lieu of the basal reading program was discussed by all of the teachers. At the kindergarten and first grade levels teachers cited use of a whole language approach. In addition to trade books, these teachers used whole language materials (e.g., the Wright Books) and emphasized students' writing with a variety of individual, shared and whole class reading activities. The fifth grade teacher used an individualized reading approach, with emphasis on student self-selected paperback books and book conferences/reports as well as whole class literature activities and individual or group skill development assignments.

No teacher used trade book literature as the sole reading instructional program; all teachers mentioned some use of basal or skills-based materials in reading instruction. The minimal amount of basal use seemed to be

at the lowest grades. The kindergarten teacher used Alpha-Time to teach letter sound-symbol association and reported that she had not assigned a reading ditto sheet or workbook all year (other than the Alpha-Time materials). Upper grade teachers seemed to use a variety of skills-based materials, such as SRA Kits, Readers' Digest Skill Builders, and Barnell Loft Specific Skill Builders.

The integration of reading (literature) and writing activities was also mentioned by all teachers. The principal stated that this had been a school-wide focus during the previous year. Several teachers mentioned integration of literature with content area studies. The second and fourth grade teachers provided several examples of science and social studies lessons which included literature. Art was frequently mentioned as a way students reported on books they read. Children's literature-based art displays were common in the halls of this school. Drama and music were infrequently mentioned and seemed less well-integrated with literature activities.

Several special events were centered on literature. The parents' organization sponsored a Young Authors project, a Readathon, a Visiting Author program, and a group literature program for grades 4 and 5 (similar to the Junior Great Books Program). The school reading specialist had

received a $900 district grant to fund a Literature for Language program. The librarian will sponsor a Library Sleep-over Night in April. The school included several special activities during national Children's Book Week in November.

While there were many literature-related activities in this school, they only partially reflected the literary activities promoted in the journal literature and state curriculum guides. Some of the activities reported by these teachers and the themes from the literature-focused articles in the Reading Teacher and Language Arts magazines during the past decade were parallel. Two of the themes identified among the periodicals' articles were easily reflected in this school's literature activities: developing students' love of reading, and extensive use of literature in beginning reading instruction. A third theme from the periodicals, using literature in the content areas, was evident to a lesser degree. The numerous references to integrated reading and writing activities in these classrooms was also well supported in magazine articles, especially in recent years.

Activities related to the use of literature for instruction in reading strategies occurred in these classrooms but was not nearly as common as in the journal

literature. In the two journals reviewed this theme accounted for approximately 20 percent of the literature-based articles, but appeared to have much less emphasis in the teachers' report of activities.

While classroom activities reflected some ideas in the practitioners' periodicals, there were other important themes which were not reflected. Approximately 20 percent of the Language Arts articles dealt with building familiarity with different literary genre; teachers never mentioned this use of literature in their classrooms. Use of literature for bibliotherapy (e.g., developing sensitivity for handicapped persons or dealing with death) was noted in between 10 and 20 percent of the periodical articles (depending upon the journal) but was not cited by the classroom teachers. Similarly, activities using literature to address the needs of special populations (e.g., students with reading disabilities or limited English proficiency) were not noted by the teachers, but represented between five and ten percent of the literature-based journal articles over the past decade.

The school's activities seemed clearly representative of a goal commonly stated in the curriculum guides: to promote independent reading and reading for pleasure. Specific activities also reflected the curriculum goals of

teaching (reading strategies and/or content material) via literature, stressing good literature, and having teachers as reading role models. However, three of the four most commonly occurring literature curriculum objectives were not specifically covered in the teachers' discussions. Those not included were:

1. to identify and experience various literary genre;
2. to recognize use of figurative language in literature (e.g., alliteration, idioms, onomatopoeia); and
3. to recognize literary forms and devices (e.g., plot, theme, characterization).

This is not to presume that such objectives are not taught, directly or indirectly, in the school's instructional program. It does point out that the teachers did not discuss these as priorities in how literature is used in their classrooms.

**What Influences Teachers' Use of Literature?**

The teachers named several different factors which influenced how they use literature in their classrooms. Some of these related to teachers' professional experience, e.g., an intuition of what works with kids, or frustration of trying to teach young children in ability-tracked groups. Some mentioned the influence of other professionals, e.g., the school's reading specialist and the district's language

arts coordinator. Still others mentioned college coursework taken as part of their professional training. Most prominently mentioned was having a good children's literature course.

The influence of children's literature courses provided an apparent anomoly. Although children's literature classes frequently use a genre approach (such as in Arbuthnot's Children and Books, a commonly used text in such classes over the past two decades), an emphasis on genre was not reflected in the teachers' comments. The perceived value from the children's literature classes seemed not to be the courses' instructional approach(es), but the wide reading of children's literature which built teachers' familiarity with children's books and awakened (or reawakened) their love of children's literature.

Professional journals such as the Reading Teacher or Language Arts were never cited as sources of ideas or inspiration. Similarly, no teacher mentioned professional books with the exception of Jim Trelease's The Read-Aloud Handbook. This matched information from my own experience. As a presenter of teacher inservices during the past few years I have sometimes polled my audience about familiarity with professional literature. I would estimate that approximately five percent of these teachers indicated

regularly reading professional literature or specific familiarity with books or reports such as Becoming a Nation of Readers.

**Conclusions**

While the teachers inteviewed defined literature in varying ways, they included a laudable number of literature activities for their students. However, these activities do not seem to reflect a broad or developmental curriculum for literature. The specific emphases discussed in the professional literature and curriculum guides for classroom uses of literature were only partially covered by the activities discussed by the teachers.

1. Overall, the observed classroom and curricular uses of literature focused on putting students in contact with print and fell into two main categories:
   (a) helping students develop a love of reading; and
   (b) developing reading proficiency by reading.
   These appear to be the easiest curriculum goals to implement and the ones which emphasize developmental curriculum the least.
2. There was more evidence of a developmental curricular focus in the uses of literature in the lower grades with beginning and early reading instruction. A whole language approach (e.g., use of predictable and pattern

books, a print-rich environment, and integration among the language arts) was evident in the professional literature (e.g., Cullinan, journal articles), at least one curriculum guide (California), and classroom activities.

3. There was little evidence of a "traditional" curricular focus in the literature activities in classrooms, e.g., emphasis on a variety of genre, literary devices, forms and language structures. These curriculum goals are more difficult than the previously mentioned goals to implement in a developmentally appropriate manner without specific knowledge, interest and preparation by the teacher.
4. A cohesive sense of specific and important foci which build together toward a larger purpose or goal was not evident at most grade levels or for most classroom activities. However, this was also true among many of the journal articles and curriculum guides reviewed.
5. Professional materials for the practitioner, such as journals and professional texts, appear to have limited influence on the uses of literature in the classrooms visited.

These data and conclusions suggest that teachers value and use literature in their classrooms. These also raise

questions about the existence of a coherent and consistently implemented focus for literature in the curriculum. Is the "traditional" literature curriculum emphasizing genre and literary form being replaced by a more holistic approach to literature? Is the literature curriculum in schools today incomplete, lacking developmental aspects to help learners grow increasingly adept at appreciating and critiquing literary works? Or will a new curriculum emerge that marries the best points of traditional and current curricular approaches to literature? This review of teachers' practices, the professional literature, and curriculum guides points out the need for such clarification of theory and practice related to the classroom uses of literature.

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